

relatively brief and for violin, were written in 2009 and feature the quasi-vocal *sospiri* familiar from the orchestral piece *Il suono e il tacere* (2004) and several other Sciarrino compositions from the first decade of this century. While Sciarrino's 1970s output was centred on instrumental music, more recently this centre has shifted towards vocal composition, including four operas since 2002, and this shift seems to be reflected in his approach to instruments too. I find these recent pieces very attractive, contradicting as they do the impression that Sciarrino's music consists of a sequence of variations on the same limited palette of sounds and structures, while continuing his phantasmal expressive atmospheres by other means. I would like to have had more in this 'late' style – the overall playing time of the CD is less than 45 minutes – but, since Sciarrino's oeuvre isn't yet 'complete', perhaps eventually there will be more violin or viola pieces to join these. Whoever records them will have to do very well indeed to equal these outstanding performances.

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Trio Accanto (Marcus Weiss, Nicholas Hodges, Christian Dierstein); *funambules*. Works by Georges Aperghis, Rolf Rhiem, Johannes Schöllhorn, Stefan Prins. Wergo WER 73582.

Trio Accanto, formed in 1994, and with its current personnel of Marcus Weiss (saxophones), Nicholas Hodges (piano) and Christian Dierstein (percussion), have embarked on an ambitious studio project to record selections from their repertoire demonstrating their range and flexibility for the Austrian label, Wergo. In its lifespan of over 20 years, the ensemble has created a body of work of almost 100 pieces for their unusual instrumentation. The first of such CDs was released in December 2016 and is named after the first piece on the album, Georges Aperghis' *funambules*. It is an apt title, as each of the four pieces featured on this album asks the ensemble to negotiate demanding and very contrasting material. And they do it very adeptly. They are in a sense, agile tight-rope walkers.

Aperghis' *Trio Funambule*, from 2014, begins with a wandering piano line and an unfocused-embouchure saxophone that sometimes turns to dirty air, the character of which at first reminds one of listening in on one of Charlie Brown's phone conversations. The

saxophone eventually becomes more active, the embouchure focuses, and high register lines continue, unstable and restless. The piano responds in bursts and splashes of dense, dissonant chords. The percussion takes on a similar role, playing small objects, mostly gongs. There's a strong sense of unsettled energy to this piece. The flurry of notes and piano clusters are not to be heard (or not able to be heard) as their component parts, but rather as a channel of tense energy. Pitch becomes a conduit rather than a container. The roles between the musicians are well articulated: they interact by reacting, playing in unison, complementing, contrasting; but the work otherwise feels directionless. Is a sense of direction the object that's trying to find its balance in this work? But thankfully moments of clarity do appear. There is a beautiful one about halfway through the piece where the sax and piano play a morose line together while the percussion comments sporadically with a flexatone. It builds to a more cohesive and aggressive pace, the piano and sax trade material while the percussionist introduces the first big skin instrument – the bass drum. After that, it loses a bit of steam as it returns to its aimless character, and then amusingly, a slide whistle enters in duet with the sax. The work leaves us without a sense of balance.

An evocative descending piano line opens Rolf Riehm's 2014 work, *Basar Aleppo oder Die Strasse nach Tyros – Klangszenen*. A mournful sax solo follows, then suddenly, spoken in German, a woman's voice appears as if from a news broadcast announcing, 'Yesterday was a horrible day'. It's a political piece, taking on an impossibly dark subject. Throughout the course of the work, she says: 'About 20 small children lie on the white tiles, their eyes closed. They look as if they are sleeping. Only their faces pressed against the wall and the strange positions of their bodies reveal that the children are not asleep. They are dead'. The last sentence finishes the piece like a hammer hitting one over the head. It begs a difficult question: how effective is a genre like contemporary music is to convey the atrocities of something as horrific as the genocide in Syria? Can art music, going about in its esoteric, self-aware space, escape from its abstractions to level a hard-hitting dose of real world conflict? It is courageous to try. Out of necessity, literal elements like the news broadcast enter the piece in order to tell us what it's about. It is at times a mournful piece (wailing saxophones), and also angry (unison banging), but also very virtuosic – atonal runs here and there (lots and lots of notes), and then moments

when the broadcaster speaks, the instruments fall silent, when they return, they attempt to 'take in' the heaviness the speaker just created in the form of more sensitively performed atonal lines. The dark sounds coming from a loudspeaker are the most interesting aspect of this work. The pre-recorded bits act as interventions, and they are the most effective because they comment on the sound-world of new music positivism by breaking it, making it feel absurd. After listening to the work, I'm not sure how to feel. Much of the music (minus the loudspeaker sounds) felt like it wanted to be its own thing, freed from the weight of its context. It actually didn't feel very connected to its subject matter. Perhaps it was the instrumental virtuosity, which cannot help but to draw attention to itself. Wailing female voices do make an appearance. I suppose these are the crying mothers (too much?). Some brief moments come into focus when the trio play a figure together, sometimes more tonal, other times as angular rhythmic blocks. The saxophone is the lead, carrying the energy of the entire 20-plus-minute-long piece. When the speaker drops the final blow onto the audience, the saxophone carries out the rest of the piece alone, squawking and squeaking its sadness. I have to ask again: can new music's abstractions convey the brutality of the genocide in Syria?

Johannes Schollhorn's earnest *Sinaia 1916* (from 2015) comes as a respite from the previous two pieces – slow moving, more tonal chord progressions – it is well placed in the flow of the album, as the previous works' 'lots of notes and big ideas' can be taxing for the ear. A slow sax line enters, following the piano's more tonal progression, then bass drum and cymbals/gongs roll underneath. It takes its time revealing itself and doesn't feel the need to move away just yet, nor does it seem to feel the need to do more. It sounds like an early twentieth-century work, still holding onto conventions of instrumental roles: piano lays out the harmonic world, lead instrument plays a melody, percussion adds textural depth. It is evocative of its reference point, an ancient monastery in the Roman city called Sinaia. It is a gorgeous and patient work.

Completing the CD, is a composer from the younger generation who has made his mark incorporating midi and other live electronics into his work, often commenting on mass culture through his references to popular video games. With a cool title, *Mirror Box (Flesh + Prosthesis)*

also from 2014, Stefan Prins creates a stunning world where flesh (musicians) and their prostheses (electronics) intertwine, becoming half man half machine. A mirror box is a therapy tool designed to eliminate phantom limb pain via the illusion of the good limb taking the place of the missing limb in the reflection, and through this process, the feedback in the brain attempts to convince itself that the limb is actually still there. Perhaps what we hear is this process. Also, perhaps, the title of this piece is political. With this metaphor in hand, bubbling and gurgling electronics, amplified and extended instruments, friction mallet bass drum, loudspeakers, cut up samples all come together in a frenzy. Jazzy licks burst out, sliced and diced, saxophone licks and samples of a drum set playing swing time are juxtaposed with more static and droney sections. There are sparse moments with discrete samples interspersed with more meditative playing by the trio. The electronics do function rather well as a fourth member of the ensemble, behaving like another voice and not as an inorganic body. One cannot help but feel like this is a refreshing and more youthful, and current expression, perhaps it serves as a kind of epilogue to the whole album. *This is where we're going*. The previous pieces end up feeling old, even though they are quite new. What's rich and interesting about *Mirror Box* is that there isn't a kind of scorched earth attitude taking place. Prins still is writing *music* and the elements of the ensemble, including the electronics are behaving like they are chamber music. There is a good balance of activity levels and the timing of materials work very well. It's yet another welcome respite from the alphabet soup of the first two pieces. It takes its time moving from space to space, giving each material time to be and to become. Well-earned and delicious low frequencies from a subwoofer enter and are brilliantly timed. The piece leaves behind the frenetic energy and opens up the space into an expansive world where one can hang out in the granularity of each sound. It does not feel like a long piece, in fact it could be much longer.

Trio Accanto's tightrope walking has resulted in an incredibly variegated collection of ambitious works, showing off their range as world-class interpreters of challenging music.

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